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ABSTRACT

The research focuses on positive and negative aspects of intercultural relationships such as marriage, close friendship, and long-term work relationships. Because intercultural relations produce greater instability than relationships between individuals of the same culture, it is hypothesized that partners involved in intercultural relationships have developed workable solutions to their problems and/or are receiving benefits that offset the greater costs. Factors which are significant in any relationship include values, perceptions, communications strategies, and interpretation of what the relationship means. Research on intercultural interaction suggests that particular problems arise due to conflicts over differences in perceived causes of a given event and uncertainty about causes of a problem. Findings from a survey of intercultural and interethnic couples in Kansas City, Missouri, indicated that interethnic couples experienced more external problems than couples from the same ethnic background and that intercountry of origin couples reported more problems associated with family life than did couples from the same country. Additional research is suggested on the part intercultural relationships may play in increasing intercultural understanding and decreasing tension. (DB)

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PROBLEMS AND BENEFITS OF CLOSE INTERCULTURAL RELATIONSHIPS

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This paper describes the first study in a research program focusing on the problems and benefits of close intercultural relationships (marriages, close friendships, long-term work relationships, etc.). Those involved in such relationships frequently experience differences in social perception, personality, and communication common to any close relationship but exacerbated by their differences in culture. Further, they often experience unique problems associated with disapproval by family, friends, and community manifested in rejection, discrimination, and sometimes violence (Stuart and Abt, 1973). There is evidence that, at least in the case of marriages, these problems produce greater instability (Carter and Glick, 1976). On the other hand, very little research has focused on the benefits of close intercultural relationships -- benefits in terms of cross-cultural learning, reduced prejudice, and personal growth and enrichment. Such benefits may as much influence the stability of the relationship as the number of problems.

The primary reason for focusing on close intercultural relationships is that for such relationships to remain stable over time, the partners must have developed workable solutions to their problems and/or be receiving benefits that offset the

greater costs. Identification of these problem solutions and benefits should have fruitful implications for improving the quality of other diverse, less intimate but important intercultural encounters. A further reason for the focus is the intrinsic importance of these increasingly frequent relationships to those involved, or contemplating being involved, in them and the necessity of generating a better understanding of their special characteristics to facilitate counseling efforts directed at their problems. While some prior attention has been given to the study of intercultural marriage (Stuart and Abt, 1973), particularly in Hawaii, (Tseng, McDermott and Maretzki, 1977), little research has systematically explored the interaction processes of such close relationships from an integrated theoretical orientation. Such is a critical need throughout the intercultural area (Samovar, 1978; Shuter, 1978) and one to which this research program is oriented.

Even a superficial study of marriage would most likely lead to the prediction that the less similar are the partners' values, perceptions, and communication strategies, etc. the less stable would be the marriage. If nothing else, a stable marriage involves some agreement on what the relationship is to mean and what it is to imply for the behavior of the partners. If so, then intercultural couples, almost by definition, would be expected to have more difficulties. Most survey data supports this prediction at least for some interethnic marriages. For instance the percentage of Anglo-Black couples married in the

1950's and still married in 1970 was about 50% -- considerably below the percentages for all Black (78%) or all Anglo (90%) couples (Carter and Blick, 1976). Whether this trend continues for the much more frequent interethnic marriages began in the 1960's and 1970's under somewhat different circumstances must await further study.

Though some intercultural marriages may be less stable than intra-cultural ones, there is evidence they often involve stronger mutual attraction -- at least initially. Driscoll et al. (1972) and Rubin (1973) found that U.S. student couples experiencing parental disapproval reported more intense feelings of love, a phenomenon they refer to for obvious reasons as the "Romeo and Juliet effect." However, they found that over time parental interference was associated with decreased trust, increased criticalness, and increased frequency of bothersome behaviors and suggest that such a trend inhibits the development of more long lasting understanding and acceptance necessary for a stable relationship. Generalizing a bit, external interference in an intercultural marriage (whether from parents, peers, or the community) may well produce more initial cohesion than in intracultural couples, but that same interference for a number of reasons may also lead to increased criticalness and lower trust detrimental to stability.

In examining close intercultural relationships we have used a social perception orientation derived largely from social

psychology. Briefly, social perception involves the process by which we interpret, make sense out of, or categorize our social world. We categorize people and social events along a number of dimensions (morality, value, attractiveness, appropriateness, etc.) and in a very real sense our social perceptions are our reality. But the process, the categories, and the dimensions are culturally learned and thus our realities are culturally relative, though they are usually perceived as absolute. One dimension along which we categorize events that has been found important for interpersonal interaction is causality, i.e., who or what caused a given event in the relationship to occur? And why? (Orvis et al., 1976; Harvey et al., 1978). The process of infering causality is referred to as causal attribution.

Research on intercultural interaction in employment (Davidson and Feldman, 1971) and schools (Schofield, 1977) suggests that intercultural relationships produce more attributional conflict than intracultural relationships. Attributional conflict involves differences in the perceived cause of a given event in the relationship. Frequently it's not the event, itself, that produces problems, but to what that event is causally attributed. For instance, a husband's arriving home intoxicated in the early morning hours might be attributed to: (1) his having been layed-off work, (2) his celebrating a promotion, (3) his being a drunk, (4) another woman, or (5) his lack of love for his wife. Which particular attribution the wife makes will largely determine her reaction and any subsequent conflict. She may attribute the

event to lack of love and judge his behavior inappropriate; he may see it as expressing independence and view it as quite appropriate. In close relationships behaviors are carefully scanned for information relevant to the actor's attitudes toward the partner (Stambul and Kelley, in press). Such may be particularly the case for intercultural couples who may be unusually unsure about their partner's attitudes. Since appropriate attributions are culturally based, intercultural couples are especially prone to attributional conflict.

The nature of the attributions the partners make over the cause of their problems will affect their evaluation of the relationship. To the extent they attribute those problems to sources internal to the relationship (e.g., personality differences) they may express dissatisfaction. To the extent they attribute problems to external sources (discrimination) they may actually be drawn closer together by the problems (perhaps the dynamic involved with the Romeo and Juliet effect). However, the addition of cultural differences and family, friend, and community disapproval as potential problems for intercultural couples may produce attributional ambiguity or uncertainty about the causes of their problems. Confident attribution of problems to a specific cause allows partners to begin developing practical solutions. If, however, a greater number of potential causes makes it difficult to decide what the "real" cause is, then the development of solutions is hindered. Thus both attributional conflict and ambiguity could pose challenges to the quality and stability of intercultural relationships.

Though this brief illustration of the applicability of an attribution orientation has focused on problems, the approach might fruitfully be applied to benefits as well. Much cultural learning and personal growth may be contingent on the manner and degree to which attributional conflict and ambiguity are dealt with. Generally, those in such relationships may develop new ways of perceiving and coping with their environment that are the essence of personal growth. Further, it should be stressed that difference in perception of causality is just one of many important differences in social perception that intercultural couples experience.

This first study was largely exploratory and used data collected from a survey of Anglo, Black, and Chicano families in the inner city of Kansas City, Missouri. The sample included 137 married couples of whom 30 were categorized as intercultural, operationalized here as being interethnic, intercountry of origin, or interreligious. Personal interviews were conducted with each marriage partner, and although each responded to a broad range of items, focus here is largely on ~~two~~ items concerning the seriousness of family problems; ~~three~~ items concerning the seriousness of problems with relatives, friends and community; and one item assessing general satisfaction with family life. Two of these items concerned problems internal to the family and three concerned problems from external sources. Comparing responses of intercultural versus intracultural couples on these two types of items thus provides the opportunity to explore differences in attribution over the perceived source of

relationship problems and the effect these differences may have on their satisfaction with the relationship. Because of the small, and not necessarily representative sample, and often marginal significance levels, the findings must be considered tentative.

First, interethnic couples reported more external problems than intraethnic couples. Specifically, they reported more severe problems with their community ($p < .05$) and more severe problems with friends or family members ($p < .20$). There were no differences approaching significance on internal family problems and interethnic couples reported being more satisfied with their family life ($p < .20$). Evidence of more severe external problems for these couples is reinforced by responses elsewhere in the survey indicating that they participated less frequently in community organizations ($p < .10$) and identified less with their neighborhood ($p < .05$). Thus interethnic couples seemed more satisfied with their marriages and tended to attribute problems externally.

Intercountry of origin marriages on the other hand reported no more severe external problems than intracountry couples, but did report more problems associated with too little time spent together as a family ($p < .20$) and they were less satisfied with their family life ($p < .10$). Thus apparently different dynamics were operating in interethnic and intercountry marriages, with the latter attributing more problems internally and fewer externally to the community. Quite possibly, differences between

partners in country of origin do not as frequently produce the disapproval and discrimination that differences in skin color may produce. Thus, they can less easily focus on external interference as a source of attribution. Their less visible, but no less significant, cultural differences still produce problems perceived as internal to the relationship, however.

Interreligious couples did not report any more severity than intrareligious couples with either internal or external family problems, nor did they report any difference in satisfaction with the family relationship. Interreligious marriages in the U.S. simply may not frequently involve large cultural differences, nor significant community disapproval -- especially intermarriage between Catholics and Protestants which comprised all but two of the interreligious marriages sampled. Further, whatever differences there are may be even less salient to interreligious couples because religion may not be as important to them to begin with. Indeed, the only meaningful differences obtained between interreligious and intrareligious couples was that the former reported being less religious ($p < .001$) and they ($p < .01$) and their children ($p < .01$) attended church less often.

To the degree that attributional ambiguity inhibits the development of problem solving strategies we might expect relationships to worsen over time. To examine this prediction more directly, interethnic, intercountry, and interreligious couples were divided into short-term versus long-term marriages based on

a median split (medians being 14 years, 12 years, and 13 years, respectively). Long-term interethnic couples reported more severe problems of all kinds than short-term couples ($p < .10$). An opposite pattern, however, is revealed for intercountry couples with long-term couples reporting less severe problems ($p < .01$). Those couples we might expect to suffer most from attributional ambiguity because of the added salience of external problems (i.e., interethnics) apparently had increasingly more difficulty dealing with their problems as predicted. Whether this difficulty was due to attributional ambiguity, more severe problems, or simply more to deal with must await more focused research. As a further note of caution, since the study was cross-sectional rather than longitudinal, differences between long- and short-term couples could be due to selectivity processes affecting the kinds of couples that survived beyond the median years, changes in the types of persons joining such relationships, or changes community acceptance of such relationships. Finally, no significant difference in problem severity was revealed between short- and long-term interreligious couples.

Considerably more intensive research with larger samples of intercultural couples, focusing on attribution processes in the context of actual interactions, is necessary to determine the usefulness of an attributional orientation to understanding problems and benefits of such couples and in providing helpful guidelines for them or their counselors. Our current research is designed to do just that. For instance, we are integrating a

process tracing methodology derived from research in human problem solving (Newell and Simon, 1972) and a critical incidents methodology (Flanagan, 1954) that has been fruitful in studying interpersonal (Orvis et al., 1976) and intercultural (Davidson and Feldman, 1971) interactions. One procedure involves selecting samples of intercultural couples and then in a structured, individual interview asking each partner to respond to carefully selected questions about specific incidents, e.g.: (1) What occurred? (2) Describe in sequence your thoughts and feelings during the incident, (3) Why do you think it occurred? (4) How confident are you that is the reason? (5) What did you do about it? Did it work? This methodology provides data about what occurred during an incident and also helps trace the social perception or attribution processes of each partner during the occurrence. Interviews are taped and responses transcribed and broken down into meaningful phrases. The phrases are then content analysed in the context in which they occur. Such analyses can provide information about the nature, cause, and importance of both problems and benefits in close intercultural relationships and the effectiveness of various attempts to improve the quality of the relationships. Research on intercultural relationships is not easy -- it involves all the problems of cross-cultural research since at least two and sometimes three (with the researcher) cultures are involved.

Though much of the discussion in this paper centers on the added problems of intercultural couples, we don't wish to imply that such must be the case. In the U.S., a significant number

of some types of close relationships (e.g., Anglo-Black marriages) is a relatively recent phenomenon. It's not at all obvious that the more recent ones, taking place within a somewhat more tolerant environment and in the context of a larger group of similar couples, will be any less stable than intracultural relationships. Close intercultural relationships may play a significant part in increasing intercultural understanding and decreasing tension. They may also provide, in part because of the problems, unusually rich experience for individuals either directly or indirectly involved.

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